



Analysis of Students with Disabilities in Agriculture

Romana Caput-Jogunica*, Danijel Čotić Primorac

Faculty of Agriculture, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia

Email: *rcaput@agr.hr

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Abstract

Inclusive European education policy is based on openness, accessibility, and equal opportunities for all interested citizens. In every country, one in ten inhabitants is, to some extent, a person with a disability. This paper reviews the relevant literature on students with disabilities in agriculture (education and employment) and aims to better inform future strategies in the agriculture sector. To assess interest in further education or training programmes in agriculture, a survey was conducted with 10 out of 31 students, 29% of whom were students with disabilities at the Faculty. Students with disabilities were asked to list the main obstacles they face in study programmes and lifelong learning programmes in the Faculty of Agriculture. Respondents cited the lack of practical experience, excessive independent work with materials, insufficiently structured programmes, and lack of assistance as major obstacles. By analysing good practice examples from other countries in the use of assistive technologies in agriculture—tools and equipment developed and adapted for people with disabilities—measures have been proposed to improve their education and employment in agriculture. Based on the study results and best practices, the authors proposed adjustments and their practical implementation to promote greater inclusion of students with disabilities in studies and lifelong learning programmes at the University of Zagreb Faculty of Agriculture.

Subject Areas

University Education, Support Services

Keywords

Agriculture, Assistive Technology, Barriers, Employment

1. Introduction

As part of the joint Tempus project “Education for Equal Opportunities at Croatian Universities—*EduQuality*” (2012-2015) [1], intensive work has been undertaken at the University of Zagreb to develop a support system for students with disabilities. This includes the university and faculty support service, with a coordinator and an administrative worker at each faculty, as well as an elective university-level subject, “Peer Support”. All activities have been coordinated by the University Office for Students with Disabilities. During these academic years, the Office has organised workshops for coordinators and administrative staff. It can be concluded that these activities have successfully contributed to and promoted social interactions and benefits within the academic community, as well as positive changes in self-esteem, self-respect, and improved career and academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

In the field of education, as part of the National Strategy for Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities [2], the need to improve the education system for students with disabilities was identified, along with the need to enhance accessibility and completion rates in higher education through an individualised approach based on the type of disability. According to Croatian universities and colleges reports, in the academic year 2024/2025, most students with disabilities are enrolled with specific learning disabilities (185, 15.78% of the total), chronic diseases (185, 15.78%), motor disabilities (173, 14.76%), and mental health disabilities. The main barriers to equality in Croatian higher education from the students’ perspective: physical barriers, minimal adaptations of toilets, lifts, classrooms and boarding rooms, insufficient transport and funding, lack of awareness and sensitivity among peers, and lack of literature [3]-[5]. Another significant barrier in the higher education system is untrained teaching staff.

A review paper by [6] identified barriers faced by students at European universities: inaccessible infrastructure and lack of adaptive technologies [7] [8]; social barriers such as stigmatisation and lack of support, which lead to social isolation and reduced self-esteem [7] [9]; and barriers arising from the attitudes of stakeholders in the education system [6]. The German universities identified barriers in the provision of learning materials, accessibility of facilities, and relationships with professors [7].

The University of Zagreb Faculty of Agriculture (Faculty) is committed to promoting equal opportunities, access, integration, and fairness since 2012. For students with disabilities, those with physical or mental health issues, or those from underrepresented groups, the Faculty provides a service and counselling centre. Due to the long-standing organised support system, it is important to emphasise that professors generally demonstrated a positive attitude and awareness of the rights of students with disabilities, but lacked the knowledge, skills, and effective strategies to support them. A study by [10] conducted on samples of teachers and administrative staff found and confirmed the same problem, a lack of education about the needs of students with disabilities.

Why Agriculture?—“The Potential of Agriculture to Provide a Living” (FAO, 2006)

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) published the document “Enhancing Opportunities in Agriculture for People with Disabilities—Guidelines for Getting People Involved” [11], which identified common barriers in contemporary society that restrict people with disabilities from fully participating in their communities, including traditional and cultural barriers, physical and psychological obstacles, and a lack of support and resources.

Rural areas comprise 63% of Croatia’s land and are home to over 1.7 million people, representing 42.5% of the Croatian population. “*Croatian agriculture is characterised by small family farms, often located in mountainous regions and in areas with natural or other specific limitations for agriculture*” [12]. Outside rural areas [13] identified various forms of agricultural production in cities, categorised as urban agriculture, peri-urban agriculture, and urban farms. They noted numerous social impacts of urban agriculture, including the promotion of activism, gender equality, and social inclusion. Horticultural therapy has long been recognised and used by both healthy and people with disabilities [14]. There is a sense of fulfilment in working the soil, sowing seeds, and growing them into plants that can be enjoyed or eaten. The connection between plants and humans offers a unique relationship for those seeking self-confidence, social integration, and, most importantly, a degree of economic independence.

In every country, one in ten inhabitants is to some extent a person with a disability [15]. In the Republic of Croatia, this proportion is even higher, with people with disabilities comprising about 15% of the total population due to the Croatian War of Independence. Disability is therefore not a characteristic of an individual, but a set of factors created by the wider social environment (labelling), a complex social network of negative attitudes, and spatial and cultural barriers. These often lead to social exclusion, socio-economic degradation, and rejection from all areas of social life as a consequence of employment and work [15] [16]. The integration of people with disabilities into agricultural activities offers many benefits, including greater economic independence and contributions to the community. Despite existing challenges, technological advances and policy changes can significantly improve the position of persons with disabilities in agriculture. This requires coordinated efforts at all levels, from local communities to international organisations, to ensure that persons with disabilities have equal opportunities to succeed in the sector.

Given the lack of studies on students with disabilities in agriculture, this paper aims to identify the current situation and address the following questions: 1) What are the employment opportunities for students with disabilities in Croatian agriculture? 2) Which good practices should be adopted to facilitate post-graduation employment? 3) What is the level of interest among students with disabilities in education in the field of agriculture? 4) What improvements are needed in the adaptation and implementation of such education? This paper provides a paper

review of the relevant literature on students with disabilities in agriculture (education and employment) and can help to better inform future strategies in the agriculture sector. To analyse the situation and answer these questions, we will use literature reviews of published material and the results of a case study provided by the student with a disability, who is the co-author of this paper from the Faculty of Agriculture.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Analysis of the Situation and Prospects for Students with Disabilities in Croatian Higher Education in Agriculture

There are eleven higher education institutions in Croatia offering degree programmes (Bachelor's and Master's) in agriculture. In the 2024/2025 academic year, 12,209 study places remained unfilled at all faculties in Croatia, representing 30% of the enrolment quota. One reason for the lower number of enrolled students is demographic change. [17] found that the main reasons why young people without a family farm do not choose a career in agriculture are lower financial income, significant physical labour, investments that do not always yield the expected income due to climate change, living in rural areas, and other factors. In the new Croatian Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for 2023-2027 [18], generational renewal is identified as one of the nine main objectives to support the survival and development of the agricultural sector by ensuring a sufficient number of qualified and motivated young farmers. Between 2016 and 2021, farm owners in all Croatian counties achieved a higher level of education [19].

2.2. Analysis of the Situation and Prospects for Students with Disabilities in Employment in Croatian Agriculture

In Croatia, 373 highly qualified persons with disabilities are employed—those who have completed a first degree at a university, university of applied sciences, academy, master's, or doctorate—representing 8.5%. In the total population, the proportion of highly qualified persons with disabilities is 23.5%, indicating a shortage of people with disabilities who possess the necessary skills and qualifications in the labour market and, consequently, a lack of competitiveness. In the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of the Republic of Croatia, out of 833 employees as of December 2024, 10 persons with disabilities were employed through recruitment and payment of quota employment and adjustment benefits, although the quota is 20 [20]. According to data for 2024 most people with disabilities were employed in manufacturing (13.1%), followed by wholesale and retail trade and repair of motor vehicles (12.3%), and accommodation and catering (11.8%). The same report shows that 85 men and 38 women with disabilities are employed in horticulture. An analysis of employed people with disabilities by age and gender shows that most are employed between the ages of 20 and 25, followed by those aged 25 to 30, and then 15 to 19. Among those aged 25 to 30, more women are employed than men.

If we search for studies on the topic of “persons with disabilities in agriculture”, we can categorise published studies into several groups: 1) employment of persons with disabilities in agriculture [17] [21] [22]; 2) the status of persons with disabilities in the education system [5] and relatively recent articles related to horticultural therapy, the trend towards green maintenance, and urban agriculture [13] [14].

3. Results—Analysis of Perspectives of Students with Disabilities in the Faculty of Agriculture: A Case Study

From the perspective of a student with disabilities at the Faculty of Agriculture, [23] identified the main barriers in Croatian agriculture: 1) Agricultural extension programmes and strategies are often not tailored to the needs of people with disabilities; 2) Discriminatory behaviour and perceptions from the community and organisations (for example, it is often assumed that people with disabilities cannot produce the same quality as other farmers, which can systematically reduce their chances of economic independence); 3) Environmental barriers related to the physical and digital characteristics of infrastructure (the lack of accessible infrastructure for teaching, transport, storage, and sale of agricultural products is a significant barrier); 4) The lack of adapted tools for sowing, harvesting, or carrying out other agricultural activities also hinders their integration into agricultural processes. Training tailored to people with disabilities for agricultural tasks is uncommon in many countries. Vocational rehabilitation and training programmes often lack specific courses or modules addressing the agricultural skills required by people with disabilities [24].

To assess interest in further education or training programmes in agriculture, a survey was conducted with 10 out of 31 students, 29% of whom were students with disabilities at the Faculty (diagnosed with Marfan syndrome, cerebral palsy, prosthetic legs, physical disabilities, etc.). The survey was carried out during the summer semester of the 2024/2025 academic year using a 12-question questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. Its aim was to explore the interests and opinions of students with disabilities at the University of Zagreb concerning barriers in study program, teaching methods and interests in lifelong learning programmes in agriculture. When students with disabilities were asked about the adjustments needed for successful participation in the faculty’s educational programmes (study and lifelong programs), the most frequently mentioned were adapted teaching materials, access to the entire lecture infrastructure, additional workshops, more training for professors and faculty staff, assistive technologies, and more practical exercises in laboratories adapted for students with disabilities. The students surveyed prefer live lectures (17 students), while 12 students expressed interest in workshops. The next most popular method is independent work with consultations with a professor or mentor, chosen by 10 students. These data indicate that the majority prefer classical or traditional learning methods. Three students expressed interest in online teaching, and nine students expressed

interest in independent work and hybrid teaching.

The most common proposals and interests for the new lifelong learning programs in the Faculty are: the application of protective measures in planting, the economic dimension of agronomy, the preservation of old indigenous seed varieties and their return to Croatian fields, as well as the preservation of diversity. Understanding the needs of students with disabilities and developing targeted programmes to address the specific challenges they face in agriculture can significantly improve their employability. For example, customised training and accessible technological tools can enable them to perform agricultural tasks more efficiently, increasing their productivity and independence. Students with disabilities were asked to list the biggest obstacles they face in study programmes and lifelong learning programmes. The most common answers were lack of time and difficulty concentrating. However, students also mentioned insufficient knowledge and the inability of professors to convey information effectively, as programmes are often short and overloaded with information and workshops. Respondents also stated that theory is often separated from practice, which is problematic because what is taught is not supported by practical examples and proves to be useless in real life. Respondents further cited the lack of practical experience, excessive independent work with materials, and insufficiently structured programmes as major obstacles. Some respondents also mentioned lack of assistance as a problem. Based on the research results, the proposed adjustments shown in **Table 1** could, if implemented in practice, contribute to greater inclusion of students with disabilities in study programmes and lifelong learning programmes in agronomy.

Table 1. Adaptation and brief description of practical application.

Adaptation/steps	Practical application
Personal assistants	Providing personal assistants to support students with disabilities in daily tasks and educational activities.
Adapted teaching aids	Incorporating teaching aids such as large print, audio materials, and software tools to make classes easier to follow.
Accessibility of spaces	Ensuring physical accessibility for students with limited mobility, including ramps and adapted toilets.
Technical adaptations	Introducing specialised equipment and tools in laboratories so that students with disabilities can participate in practical classes.
Adaptation of teaching methods	Adapting teaching methods such as visual explanations and special seminars for better understanding of theoretical knowledge.
Online teaching options	Providing online classes for students who have difficulties with physical access or prefer to work in an adapted environment.
Conducting a comprehensive needs analysis	Conducting analyses to identify the specific needs of students with disabilities, including additional research and consultations with relevant experts.
Developing and implementing adaptations	Developing specific adaptations and implementing them in study program and lifelong learning programs, including infrastructure, teaching aids and support.

Continued

Continuous monitoring and evaluation	Continuously monitoring the effectiveness of the implemented adaptations and evaluating them for continuous improvement.
Educating teaching staff	Ensuring education and training of teaching staff to work with students with disabilities, including understanding their needs
Raising awareness and providing information	Increasing awareness among students and teaching staff about the importance of inclusiveness and promotion of adapted programs.

Although digital agriculture offers solutions that can help overcome some of these barriers, people with disabilities are often excluded from these innovations due to limited literacy and digital skills. However, the use of digital technologies in agriculture, such as smart farming tools and predictive analytics, could provide better access to markets, tools, and information needed to participate effectively in agriculture. To include persons with disabilities effectively in the work process, it is important to raise awareness among farmers, agribusinesses, and the general public of their capabilities and potential, thereby reducing the stigmatisation and discrimination that make their lives difficult. Greater inclusion in agriculture can significantly reduce poverty, increase food security, and promote sustainable development that improves not only their lives but also the economy and society as a whole [25]. Training tailored to persons with disabilities for agricultural tasks is uncommon in many countries. Vocational rehabilitation and training programmes often lack specific courses or modules addressing the agricultural skills required by people with disabilities [24].

4. Current Trends and Practices in the Employment of Persons with Disabilities in Agriculture

Agriculture provides a range of employment opportunities that can be tailored to the abilities and needs of people with disabilities. According to the social model of disability, persons with disabilities are not limited by their physical or mental conditions, but by social and physical barriers that restrict their access to resources and opportunities [26]. Practical examples (Table 2) show that some countries have introduced programmes to facilitate access to agricultural activities. In industrialised countries, people with disabilities can perform tasks such as planting, harvesting, and tending livestock through the technical adaptation of tools. Assistive technology comprises aids and devices that reduce physical effort and improve access to essential resources. These devices include adapted vehicles, tools with extended handles, anti-vibration gloves, and shock-absorbing footwear, enabling people with disabilities to manage the physical demands of farming more easily [27].

These examples demonstrate the importance of a comprehensive approach that includes policy support, joint action by ministries and non-governmental organisations, and the development of adapted technological solutions to enable people with disabilities to reach their full potential in agriculture. They also highlight the

Table 2. Good practices for the use the assistive technology in agriculture.

Country	Background information on good practises
Bangladesh	“Accessible Gardens” can help people with spinal cord injuries participate in horticultural activities. These gardens feature wheelchair-accessible paths and raised beds that are easily reached by seated individuals [28].
Ghana	People with disabilities are actively involved in agricultural activities that are directly linked to household food security. A study conducted in the Savelugu/Nanton community has shown that people with disabilities participate in agricultural activities through both their labour and decision-making [29].
India	The “Agriculture for the Disabled” project provides people with disabilities with adapted tools and techniques to facilitate agricultural activities. These tools are designed to reduce physical effort and are tailored to users’ specific needs to ensure greater efficiency at work [30]. People with disabilities use adapted vehicles that allow easier access to agricultural land, as well as sowing and harvesting tools that require less physical effort [31].
Nigeria	People with disabilities actively participate in agricultural activities, often out of necessity and for survival. A study by [6] highlights the need to develop programmes that include people with disabilities in agricultural and entrepreneurial activities, while ensuring access to education, credit, and markets.
United States of America	The “AgrAbility” programme aims to support people with disabilities in agriculture. It provides a variety of equipment and tools to facilitate daily tasks on the farm [31]. These aids enable users to perform tasks such as planting, harvesting and herding livestock with less difficulty, directly contributing to their productivity and independence.

need for further research to ensure a better understanding of the needs and opportunities of people with disabilities in the agricultural sector, with particular attention to women with disabilities, who face additional challenges.

Understanding the needs of people with disabilities and developing targeted programmes that address the specific challenges they face in agriculture can significantly improve their employability. For example, customised training and accessible technological tools can enable them to perform agricultural tasks more efficiently, increasing their productivity and independence. Socio-cultural factors play an important role in adapting jobs and infrastructure for people with disabilities in agriculture [32]. Developing an inclusive workplace culture is essential. This involves training all employees on the importance of diversity and inclusion, and actively challenging prejudices and stereotypes. Employers should adapt the workplace, including modifying tools and equipment to ensure they are accessible and useful for people with different types of disabilities [33] (Table 3).

Strategies to improve the employment of people with disabilities in agriculture are essential for creating inclusive workplaces that support diversity and promote equal opportunities. The first step in this process is to clearly define employment

goals and establish expectations adapted to the abilities of all workers, including those with disabilities. It is important to ensure that education and training are accessible, using technology to facilitate access to materials and resources [35].

Table 3. Examples of measures for employing people with disabilities in agriculture.

Measures	Short description
Adaptation of tools or workstations	In some cases, it may be necessary to adapt equipment, such as gloves with special grips or boots that can be easily removed [34]. Using the examples listed in Table 1 , we can identify solutions and adapted tools that will help to create a safe and successful working environment.
Development of an inclusive workplace culture	Introducing awareness-raising and training programmes for employees, including managers and supervisors, can help create an environment where people with disabilities feel valued and supported. Regular feedback from people with disabilities can provide insight into how work environments and practices can be further improved.
Use of technology in education	Adapting technological tools and machines to be user-friendly for people with various disabilities can increase their independence and productivity. In addition, e-learning enables people with disabilities to access education without the physical barriers found in traditional educational institutions. Digital platforms can provide customised learning modules accessible from anywhere, which is particularly useful for people in rural areas.
Strengthening partnerships with supporting organisations	Partnerships with national, regional, and local organisations that support people with disabilities can provide valuable resources and support for businesses that employ or wish to employ them. These organisations can offer specialised training, help identify qualified candidates with disabilities, advise on workplace adjustments, and share best practices for managing a diverse workforce.

5. Strategies to Support Students with Disabilities in Higher Educational System

The number of students with disabilities in higher education continues to increase [36]. Barriers must be removed at both individual and institutional levels to ensure equal opportunities for all. [37] found that many students with disabilities had positive experiences with faculty, who were a key aspect of disability support. Several studies show that students with disabilities achieve the same academic success as others when they have access to institutional support systems, indicating that the institutional level is highly significant [7] [38]-[40]. A systematic review in the European Area of Education [6] highlights the crucial role of teaching staff throughout the process. The future interventions to provide more adequate formal support in higher education include standardising assistance (establishing mandatory, specific regulations), adapting infrastructure (removing structural barriers), providing ongoing training for teaching staff (thematic seminars, several courses per academic year), and raising student awareness (promoting sensitivity to diversity among students) [4].

The case study provided by the co-author clearly demonstrated a significant need for adjustments in the study programmes and lifelong learning programmes of the Faculty of Agriculture to ensure equality and inclusiveness for all students, especially those with disabilities. The Faculty of Agriculture and its Centre for Lifelong Education have the opportunity to become leaders in developing inclusive education in Croatian agronomy. Implementing the necessary adjustments and continuously improving the programmes is essential to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, can fully benefit from their educational opportunities and achieve success in their academic and professional lives.

6. Conclusions

From the results presented, it appears that some of the study programmes at the Faculty of Agriculture for student with disabilities can be adapted to the needs of the students and enable them to find employment in a wider range of occupations in addition to gardening, which was previously only covered by the Croatian Employment Service. Students with disabilities pointed out the problems (barriers) that faculty need to work on in order to provide them with the same opportunities as other students. It is necessary to work simultaneously on educating professors, professional services, and all students. The field of agriculture should be considered multifunctional [41]: social farms, inclusion farms with animals, with the above-mentioned activities that can be carried out in urban and rural areas, and horticultural therapy on students' campuses [42] and different facilities and institutions.

Education plays a key role in empowering people with disabilities to participate in agriculture. It is recommended to develop and implement special education programmes that include tailored curricula and practical training. This is because the use of adapted tools and machinery is crucial to overcome physical barriers and fulfil tasks in agriculture. Targeted research is needed to investigate the introduction of technologies such as autonomous tractors, sensor systems and other assistive technologies and adapted machinery in agriculture using examples of best practise. Collaboration between different sectors is important to integrate resources and knowledge from different sources that can provide innovative solutions for inclusive employment in agriculture.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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